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Organ patients benefit if they play by the rules

By ELAINE BERG

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There is a direct correlation between the number of people desperately awaiting lifesaving organ transplants and the lack of available organs. This gap has generated an ever-increasing and disturbing phenomenon: patients soliciting organs in a public campaign.

A few people who needed transplants attempted to bypass the organ allocation system set in place by the United Network for Organ Sharing, or UNOS, by launching solicitation appeals that have garnered a great deal of media coverage.

Last summer, 32-year-old Todd Krampitz posted a plea for a liver on a prominent Houston billboard. He later received the transplant from an out-of-state donor. Sadly, Krampitz, who suffered from liver cancer, died eight months later.

Another appeal arose when New Yorker Shari Kurzrok, 31, unexpectedly went into liver failure just months before she planned to marry. Kurzrok's position at a public relations firm contributed to a full-fledged campaign led by co-workers, friends and family to find a liver. The urgent call was relayed nationwide on radio, TV, newspapers and Web sites.

Organ solicitation appeals call into question the very system established by UNOS that relies upon strict accountability, fairness and, more importantly, the public's trust.

Kurzrok received a new liver. But it was the UNOS national system, and not her public campaign, that secured the organ. The UNOS system is founded on the principles of equity and medical benefit. Donor information is passed along to the transplant physician, who then decides whether a specific organ offer is acceptable. This outcome has not received the media coverage it merits.

Clearly, Kurzrok was critically ill and her priority on the national waiting list reflected that. But the happy ending to the story illustrates that the transplant system works. Still, the system can only work if people choose to become donors. The national average of 55% of families who consent to donate is not enough.

Society must stop turning to the media each time an organ cannot be immediately found. If people lose faith in the system we already have in place, opting to bypass the normal process, there is a good chance that fewer people will want to donate through the proper channels. That could hurt everyone, particularly those most in need of the gift of life.

Berg is president and CEO of the New York Organ Donor Network.